

Oscar-Winning Director William Wyler Dies at 79
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Oscar-Winning Director William Wyler Dies at 79

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William Wyler, an immigrant who used his memories of U.S. Air Force combat service during World War II to direct the Academy Award-winning film "The Best Years of Our Lives," is dead at 79.

Wyler, who won two other Oscars for best director, died of a massive heart attack Monday afternoon at his home in Beverly Hills, his family said.

His daughter Judith Sheldon said Wyler had returned Sunday from England, where the British Film Institute had honored his motion picture career, dating back to silent films in 1920.

"They (the British Film Institute) played all his movies over two months and then he appeared and spoke," his daughter said.

The British honor turned out to be the last Wyler received in a long career of film successes and awards. He directed 41 feature films and



Los Angeles Times

William Wyler in 1980

was nominated for best director 14 times, according to records kept by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts

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and Sciences. Wyler won the Academy Award for best director for "Mrs. Miniver" in 1942, "The Best Years of Our Lives" in 1946 and "Ben Hur" in 1959.

His credits as a film director spanned the quickie two-reel Westerns he began making in 1925 to his final film, "The Liberation of L.B. Jones" in 1970, a story about problems faced by blacks.

Films he took particular pride in, besides his three Oscar triumphs, included "Jezebel," 1938; "The Little Foxes," 1941; "The Heiress," 1949; "Detective Story," 1951; "Roman Holiday," 1953; "The Desperate Hours," 1955; "Friendly Persuasion," 1956; "The Children's Hour," 1962, and "Funny Girl," 1968.

An urbane, literate man, Wyler delighted in taking works of major playwrights and novelists and bringing them to the screen. Movies he made included plays or novels by Lillian Hellman, Somerset Maugham, Jessamyn West, MacKinlay Kantor, Emily Bronte, Henry James and Theodore Dreiser.

"The story is always the central problem in any film I have directed," he said in a 1947 interview.

In another interview, Wyler stressed that a story alone is not enough to make a good film.

"You have to have the passion to tell the story, and you have to know how to tell it with style," he said.

Demanding Director

Wyler had the reputation of being demanding, often requiring a single scene to be shot 20 or more times before it suited him.

"I long ago decided that whatever extra trouble was necessary to make a scene right, or better, was worth it," he said in one interview.

Times Arts Editor Charles Champlin said, "Like George Stevens and William Dieterle in earlier years and David Lean among surviving directors, Wyler was a painstaking and perfectionist craftsman who was sometimes a trial to his actors and crew people but who did as many takes as he needed to get exactly the shot—light, shadow, movement, composition, voice—that he wanted.

"The results, as in 'The Heiress' and 'The Little Foxes,' are the highest expression of the art of Hollywood at its peak. And Wyler's 'The Best Years of Our Lives,' his warmest and almost certainly his most deeply felt film—he too was a returning GI—ranks with 'Citizen Kane' and perhaps two or three others as the best American films ever made."

"The Best Years of Our Lives" was a story about returning World War II veterans, and Wyler attributed its great critical and box office success to his own personal knowledge of the war and its aftermath.

Volunteered for Army

Wyler was 39 when World War II broke out, but he nevertheless volunteered for the U.S. Army Air Forces early in 1942. He was commissioned as a major and assigned to make combat documentaries in Europe.

One of his 1944 documentaries, "The Memphis Belle," about bomber operations over Axis territory, was described by film critic Bosley Crowther as "one of the finest fact films of the war."

Wyler flew on combat missions to gain insight for his wartime documentaries, and he was awarded the Air Medal and promoted to lieutenant colonel. While shooting a documentary about fighter-bombers over Italy, he sustained an ear injury from high altitude flying.

The son of a Swiss father and a German mother, Wyler was born on July 1, 1902, in Mulhouse, then a part of German Alsace. As a boy during World War I, he saw his hometown change sides a dozen times before it became part of France.

In 1920, he got his first motion picture job as a \$15-a-week office boy through his mother's first cousin, Carl Laemmle, who was head of Universal Pictures. Because of his knowledge of French and German, Wyler was promoted to head the studio's foreign publicity.

He began directing in 1925, and he later said the now forgotten low-budget Westerns he started with taught him the basic elements of a good motion picture.

Wyler married actress Margaret Sullivan in 1934. They were divorced in 1936.

Four Children

In 1938 he married actress Margaret Tallichet, who was with him at the time of his death. They had four children—Mrs. Sheldon, Catherine, Melanie and David Wyler, and three grandchildren.

Wyler received the David Wark Griffith Award of the Directors Guild of America in 1966 and the Life Achievement Award of the American Film Institute in 1977. He was only the fourth recipient of the latter award, having been preceded by John Ford, James Cagney and Orson Welles.

Memorial services will be held at 2:30 p.m. Friday at the Directors Guild of America, 7950 Sunset Blvd. In lieu of flowers, the family requests contributions to the Motion Picture and Television Country House and Hospital, 23450 Calabasas Road, Woodland Hills, Calif 91364.